

Frances Fowle
University of Edinburgh
"Peripheral Impressionisms"

Today few Impressionist scholars recall the era when the Clark that dominated and determined the way we talked about art was the author of *Civilisation* (1969); when art history was synonymous with connoisseurship; and when art historians adopted a methodology without social referents.¹² In 1970 Impressionism was still articulated through the language of Fry's formalism. By the late 1980s the pioneers of the new social history of art—T.J. Clark, Robert Herbert, Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock—had produced an entire generation of scholars. Their socio-historical approach to Impressionism has prevailed, even if it has been persistently challenged by advocates of modernism such as Michael Fried and largely ignored by the French academic system. Indeed, French institutions such as the Ecole du Louvre and the Institut National de l'Histoire de l'Art (INHA), intent on training the curators of the future, continue to privilege historiography, style, and object-based analysis.

Arguably a formalist approach is also relevant when considering some of the great British (and indeed American) collections of Impressionism. Samuel Courtauld, for one, was the archetypal connoisseur collector; he acquired his pictures under Fry's influence, favouring Manet and Cézanne over Monet, Sisley and Pissarro (the last three defined by some critics as "scientific" impressionists¹³ and in George Moore's *Modern Painting* (1893) as "decadent").¹⁴ William

¹¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books 1979); and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe:*

Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹² Kenneth Clark, *Civilisation* (London: BBC books, 1969).

¹³ For example, the critic "Ion" defined Monet and his contemporaries as those who "work from a new direction

altogether, namely a scientifically analytical one." See Ion, "'Some Phases of Modern Art, II: Impressionism,"

Scots Pictorial (16 August 1913), 502.

¹⁴ Critics often distinguished between the "impressionism" of James McNeill Whistler, which meant painting

tonally in a broad, sketch-like manner, and the "impressionism" of Claude Monet, which meant analyzing light

and color. See Frank Rutter in Kate Flint, ed., *Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception* (London:

Routledge, 1984), 33.

6

Burrell, too, was guided indirectly by Fry, preferring to lend his Impressionist paintings to the Tate Gallery rather than upset the "harmony" of his Medieval interiors at Hutton Castle. But collectors of Impressionism such as Courtauld and Burrell are also part of the social art history,

a by-product of the economic changes that saw the rise of the mercantile classes and the establishment of a market for Impressionism in the late nineteenth century.

Perhaps, then, a new direction for Impressionist scholarship is to be found in this emerging area of art history, namely art market studies. This relatively new discipline brings the emphasis

back to the object and, yet, is firmly rooted in the historical, economic, and social context of its time. It is still viewed with suspicion by some scholars, perhaps due to its

interdisciplinary

fusion of economics and art history. Yet the way was indicated some years ago by pioneering texts such as Nicholas Green's "Dealing in temperaments: economic transformation of the artistic field in France during the second half of the nineteenth century" and Robert Jensen's *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-siècle Europe*.¹⁵ Meanwhile, exhibitions on Impressionist dealers such as Theo van Gogh (1999), Ambroise Vollard (2007), and Paul Durand-Ruel (2015) have gradually refreshed and invigorated this important field of art history.¹⁶

As well as underpinning new research on the Impressionist art market, social art history can enrich the discourse in other areas, notably around more "problematic" French Impressionists who have been "written out" of art history. These might include artists on the edge of Impressionism, such as Armand Guillaumin, the "people's" Impressionist, who worked for the Paris-Orléans railway before winning the lottery. His paintings of steam-driven cranes on the Paris quais can be discussed as products of the artist's own social struggle. Moreover, Guillaumin's virtual disappearance from the Impressionist canon is, at least in part, a consequence of the formalist approach, which dismisses him as "second-rate" and difficult to categorise, falling as he does between Impressionism and fauvism.¹⁷

Finally, rather than ask the question "Is the social history of art 'finished' in relation to Impressionism?" should we not question the current status of French Impressionism in relation to recent scholarship? From a curatorial perspective, virtually every topic has been exhausted:

from Impressionists by the Sea to Impressionist Gardens and Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity.¹⁸ Meanwhile, art history is beginning to shift the focus from Paris towards other parts of Europe and beyond. In the past few years, there have been major international

15 Nicholas Green's "Dealing in temperaments: economic transformation of the artistic field in France during the second half of the nineteenth century", *Art History*, 10, 1, March 1987, 59-78; Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

16 Chris Stolwijk, Richard Thomson, and Sjraar van Heugten, ed., *Theo Van Gogh 1857-1891: art dealer, collector, and brother of Vincent* (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 1999); Rebecca A. Rabinow, ed., *Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006); and Sylvie Patry et. al., *Inventing Impressionism: Paul Durand-Ruel and the Modern Art Market* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).

17 James Rubin notes the relatively few examples of Guillaumin's work in public collections, due to his reputation as "an undisciplined Impressionist or an avant-garde Fauve". <http://www.19thcartworldwide.org/spring10/armand-guillaumin> (accessed 15 August 2017).

18 John House and David Hopkin, *Impressionists by the Sea*, (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2007); Clare A. P. Willson, *Impressionist Gardens* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2010); and Gloria Groom, *Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012).

7

exhibitions on